Abnormal

Amelia Barret rested her finger on the trigger. The blaster hummed a little, glowing in anticipation. Any minute now and the ghoul would show its face. Not that it had a face, of course. Everyone expected ghouls to have faces, like ghosts from old horror movies, which Amelia could never understand. It was the first thing people commented on whenever she arrived at their doorstep, equipment in hand, displaying her Anti-Ghouler identification card. That or a joke about pest extermination. One or the other.

Amelia shifted slightly, wincing as the floorboards under her feet creaked. The old woman had said the ghoul usually hid up here in the attic and so Amelia had stationed herself in the corner of the room ready to destroy anything that moved. So far, the only thing that had moved had been a rather large mouse.

She was beginning to get restless when the ghoul appeared out of nowhere, its gruesome, slimy body squeezing its way through the opposite window, hundreds of tendrils pulling its blubbery faceless body through the narrow window, gooey flesh rolling over and over like an oversized slug. Amelia took the shot and another for good measure, even though she really didn't need to. This was only a Class III Motile ghoul, easy enough to get rid of. That's not what she told the old lady though. Class II's earn you a little more money after all and Mrs Silvestri clearly did not know the difference.

"You really shouldn't call about any old ghoul, Mrs Silvestri," said Amelia, after she had refused yet another offer of a cup of tea. The quicker she could leave this musty old house the better. "They don't do any serious harm really, apart from as an eyesore so it's best to leave them to it."

Mrs Silvestri shook her head, clutching her mug, which said '*super-grandma*' on it. "Oh no, I couldn't live with that horrible thing up there. It had me breaking out in a fever every morning, and just the thought of it…" The old woman shuddered.

Amelia sighed. "Honestly, it's best to leave them be, they die off eventually… If us broad-spectrum Anti-Ghouler's keep coming out for low threat species, then…" She left the sentence hanging, not wanting to verbalise her suspicions. The last time she had shared her concerns, no one had listened.

Mrs Silvestri's eyes grew cold, the lines on her face hardening. "That's not what your colleague said."

"My colleague…?"

"Yes, a lovely man. Amox was his name, I believe. He said the best thing to do would be to call him anytime and he'd be over in a jiffy. No fuss about broad and narrow and all that jargon. I don't really see what the problem is. In any case, I think I will be calling him the next time I have a problem. He's much cheaper than what you're charging anyway. Goodbye."

Mrs Silvestri closed the door, leaving Amelia out in the cold. "You do that," she muttered to the door, zipping up her fraying jacket. "And he's not my bloody colleague."

Amox was another Anti-Ghouler for hire, like Amelia. Unlike Amelia, however, his business was doing far better than hers which was highly irritating for several reasons the chief of which being that he had branded his entire business around the movie, *Ghostbusters*. This seemingly innocuous and quirky marketing campaign meant that the general public had come to associate the entire profession with '80s Bill Murray, proton packs and giant Stay Puft Marshmallow men and Amelia had henceforth been forced to deal with customer's being disappointed in her low-key non-*Ghosbusters* approach.

That was annoying enough without the added aggravation of Amox's greedy and reckless work ethic which had increasingly started to worry her. Practises like refusing to call in narrow-spectrum specialists for individual specific ghouls and instead using his broad range tactics for every ghoul he

was called in to exterminate was having consequences, consequences that he and the rest of the city had continued to brush under the carpet for years.

In fact, it had been Amox with whom Amelia had shared her doubts about current practises of dealing with ghouls. Over the years, she had come across a few… abnormalities. Abnormalities that she was certain were being caused by the careless over-extermination of ghouls that should have been left to die naturally without intervention. But, of course, leaving them to die off naturally would be a loss of profit for greedy Amox so he had rudely brushed off her warning.

The last Abnormality Amelia had encountered had been in a theme park near the seaside. It was hard enough trying to pin down the ghoul in the vast park but when she finally did, it had not looked like any of the others Amelia had ever come across. The beast's hide was much thicker than normal, globules of random particles suspended in a sticky matrix that protected its insides from attack.

Two shots from her blaster was usually enough to destroy one but the Theme Park Ghoul didn't even slow down after ten. Eventually, Amelia had the idea to change to another type of blaster (the Cephalex 3.0) that, by a stroke of luck, she had rattling around in the boot of her car for months. Though that did the trick, the monster had wreaked havoc by the time she had managed to kill it. Lives had been lost, and of course, she had received the blame. Business never really recovered after that.

Ghouls had never scared her, even as a child. They were little more than pests in her mind. But, the Theme Park Ghoul, that Abnormality… That one had stayed in her nightmares for a long time afterwards…

Burying her hands in her pockets, Amelia started the long walk back into the city where her small office was located. On the way she passed Amox's 'Ghoulbusters' shop, looking in disgust at the life-size cardboard cut-out of the man himself beaming in his idiotic costume, whitened teeth and fake tan, clutching a proton pack that he had probably ordered from the local costume shop. Ridiculous.

Amelia was just about to walk on when a hand grabbed her from behind, its grip iron clad. "Barret! Thank god!" said a voice.

She whipped around, trying to free herself and found herself face to face with the man himself, Amox. "What the-" she began, seriously considering punching the man.

"You have to help me!" he interjected. His eyes were wide, his clothes torn apart, filthy. There was blood trickling down from his nose. He looked like a mad man. "The ghoul, it mutated… I couldn't… Its skin is impenetrable…"

Amelia finally managed to free herself. "What the hell are you talking about, Amox? Is this some kind of prank?"

"NO! You were right!" he shouted, panting hard. His face was redder than usual, and he had clearly run a long way to get there. "You were right, that day you told me we needed to stop killing all… the ghouls. There's a new one… Down a few blocks north. I only… just got away. The family there…dead."

Amelia finally realised what he was saying and resisted the urge to say, '*I told you so*'. "Where is it now?"

"I don't… I just ran."

She ran her hand through her hair in frustration. "Damn it, Amox, you should have it kept it in your sight. Now it could be anywhere."

"You didn't see what I saw… it was horrible…"

Amelia looked at Amox, the sight of the man pitiful especially in contrast to his smiling cut out in the shop window. "Okay, here's what we do. Our normal weapons aren't going to work against it, so we need to get all the older models out and try them out against it. One of them could work. It's our only hope"

Amox nodded, wiping his nose with the back of his hand. "G-good. I have a few in the back. I'll go get them from the shop, stay here."

He returned after a few moments, carrying a heavy bag of clunky guns- the Cephalex 3.0, Sulfamet pellets and extra Doxy rounds- as well as a handful of Tetra grenades that Anti-Ghouler's had used back in the '50s. They retraced his steps back a few blocks and were immediately met with a path of destruction- fallen trees, wrecked cars and screaming bystanders. They followed the calamity until they reached East Park, which was the biggest open space in the city.

"There it is!" said Amox, pointing towards the small wooden bridge which stretched across a stream.

Amelia's stomach turned at the sight of it. It was truly monstrous. Greenish-grey translucent skin containing thousands of suspended particles writhed and wriggled as it moved forward, and hundreds of thrashing tendrils moved backwards and forwards grabbing everything in sight. Like the Theme Park Ghoul, this one's skin was much thicker, a film covering its entire body which seemed to protect it from everything and anything that flew into it. Interestingly, Amelia noted, the colour of this barrier matched exactly the colour of the blaster ammo that most Anti-Ghoulers, including herself, usually used on the job. It seemed as though this Abnormality had grown to adapt to their usual methods of extermination. If they weren't face to face with an enormous, destructive monster, Amelia might have made a quip about Darwin but at this very moment, she did not have the presence of mind to think of a good one.

"HEY!" shouted Amelia. "OVER HERE!"

The beast turned slowly, heading towards the source of the noise, its body engulfing anything and everything in its path like lava seeping down a volcano. Hoping it was as slow as normal ghouls, Amelia set about loading one of the blasters, whilst Amox fumbled around with a grenade. Once the ghoul was close enough, she began to shoot, not stopping to see if it had worked. Amox, meanwhile, threw the grenade which exploded in a brilliant purple flash. The ghoul stopped for a moment, more out of surprise than actual injury, but then continued to glide forward. It had not worked.

Diving out of the way of its path, Amelia landed on her arm hard. Amox wasn't as lucky. He hadn't managed to move out of the way, and she could only watch in horror as the Abnormality reached out with its tendrils and engulfed the man whole. Someone nearby screamed. It was chaos. What had Bill Murray said? Something about human sacrifice, dogs and cats living together, mass hysteria… Amox would have loved that reference but unfortunately, he was too dead to hear it. And Amelia would be dead too if she didn't act quickly.

Time seemed to slow down. Up close, Amelia could just about see through the beast's hide and into its internal organs. Her mind flicked back to college, to learning about the way her blaster worked. Targeting the hide was the easiest way to kill a ghoul but clearly that hadn't worked. She needed to target its internal regeneration mechanism, the way it synthesised more of itself, that was the only way.

Grabbing a Tetra grenade from the ground, she pulled the pin and thrust her hand into the slimy monster, its insides disgustingly warm, like spoilt jelly. Letting go of the grenade, she extracted her arm, now covered in gunk, and took cover behind a nearby bench. One, two, three… Nothing happened.

Sticking her head out in confusion, Amelia was just about to go for another grenade when an explosion knocked her off her feet. Clambering back up, she found herself drenched in gunge, but she didn't care. The ghoul was dead. It was all over.

Amelia was just wondering if Amox had had any family when her thoughts were interrupted by a piercing scream that came from outside the park. She turned around, looking directly at a busy city street. A woman was pointing into one of the windows and screaming. In unison, dozens of windows on both sides of the street smashed and Abnormalities, hundreds of them, burst out onto the street, their grotesque slithering bodies upending cars, bending lampposts and sprawling across the pavement. There were a few normal ghouls among them too, smaller than the rest, but the Abnormalities were transforming them somehow, infecting them with their power, until every ghoul there was an Abnormal.

Amelia cursed, taking back her previous invoking of Bill Murray because this truly was the mass hysteria he had been referencing. Assessing her depleted weapon supply and trying not to think about what would happen when there were no weapons left to try, Amelia Barret lifted her blaster towards the nearest Abnormality and squeezed the trigger.